

## **The first of the six 'I' s of real learning - Individual**

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### **The strong case for one-to-one learning**

If, like me, you see the purpose of learning and development as directly contributing to the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations, then I hope these thoughts help.

Fundamentally, I believe that the investment of time and money in any form of employee development should focus on the specific, unique, dynamic, individual needs, circumstances, context and challenges of *each* person with whom we work.

Have we ever encountered anyone whose potential has been fully developed? What more can we do to guide and assist talented people to perform and contribute closer at least to the limits of their capability?

One-to-one working is too often, I believe incorrectly, seen as an expensive way to develop capability.

I have found that a motivated, supported individual can, measured in financial terms, return remarkable value, by truly driving their own development, energised by leading that process, rather than being unhelpfully limited by boundaries, prescriptive irrelevant content and being left without interest or support post-event.

### **Group working is rarely cost-effective**

Put eight people in a room, and for me, it is already really difficult to sufficiently focus on the specific issues that create learning for *each* that results in application on the return to work.

Yes, there is value in group work, and this can, when deliberately designed, enhance solo learning. Where this becomes the administratively convenient norm, without any consideration of individual learning needs I question the value.

It deeply disappoints me that my frustrations around the dependence on group delivery over individual learning support is stronger now than when I began this wonderful, crazy journey in October 1982.

Despite the millions of words written on the reality of individual real world activity and experiences driving learning – typically claimed to be 70% of all development, I see too many organisations and practitioners clinging to the same old training courses, with little or no interest or focus on the very different work worlds each person lives in and to which they will return.

Working with individuals and genuinely being driven by their unique contexts and needs is not easy. The skills required to work one-to-one are very different to facilitating group work.

Fair enough, I recognise that a lot of what I am pushing here is tough, and in many cases, yes, impossible. I do feel that there are, however infrequently, opportunities to discard the 'must get at least six people into to room' mentality, and work in six different ways with them.

A lot of attention has, over recent years rightly been given to return on investment. In my (ever so humble opinion, a thorough analysis of most (?) group-based training would show a very poor, if any return.

The evaluation of one-to-one development is a far easier process to measure, expenditure can be clearly and precisely defined, and a competent supporting practitioner can accurately measure attributable financial differences made by each person with whom they work.

### **Supporting each person's development should be operationally embedded**

My wish list for an ideal learning world includes explicit, measured and rewarded line managerial expectations around their own development and leading that of each direct report. Have any of us seen a job description that sets these tasks?

Line managers are the key, they can, with support, provide the infrastructure to enable an emphasis on individual development, either led by themselves, or involving others within or outside the organisation. Reality check: They have never been busier, and finding the space for these additional, in my view, business-critical activities will be too often, another impossibility.

During performance reviews individual needs are considered, and yet more often than not, these are jettisoned in favour of the lazy, low to no value training course option.

I am trying to be realistic here, and part of that is recognising that learners themselves may find a shift from the comfort of group experiences to the exposure, responsibility and accountability of genuinely working solo more than difficult. It is for some, an easier place to criticise a training course for being a waste of time, ('heard it all before'), than truly leading with support, a development path where they are the focus, where success or not is to a large degree dependent on their desire to drive the process.

It is sadly, no surprise to me to see budgets for the development of talent cut so readily when times get tough. We need a different, more clearly value added approach to supporting learning, that is not costly training course based, with associated expenses and time away from work. Proving the attributable return (or not) on investment of a simple accountable coached programme is easy. Be forewarned, this very exposed accountability does not work for all learning practitioners.

In my experience, working on the development of individuals needs careful explanation, clarification of roles and sought outcomes, and the opportunity to decline involvement for whatever reason given.

### **Talent and potential is most clear when working one-to-one**

It is hard for anyone with significant, impressive potential to show this within a group of six, twelve, and particularly more. One-to-one working has given me, and client organisations a very clear and often very new indication of current talents and future roles of most value.

Focusing on individuals allows a more accurate assessment of each person's current skill set and development needs to be worked upon. Stars of the future can be lost in a crowd of competing noise. Isolating individual contribution and capabilities within groups is harder than when working with each person alone. Talent can thus be identified, retained, and nurtured.

For any of this to happen, for at least more potential to be realised individually, an absolutely fundamental issue needs to be addressed and repaired – yes there's even more to do!

There is I observe, far too often, a clear disconnect between learning, its application in the workplace, and reward. If people felt that their learning led directly to promotion, more pay, even recognition, we in learning and development wouldn't be able to cope with the rush for our help.

## **A last thought**

Finally, something for us. My own experience of working coaching and supporting, often with a very light touch, has created valuable learning for me. Doing the same things repeatedly during group training delivery does not provide anything like the opportunities for my own personal learning as being led by a stream of engaged, curious individuals eager to fulfil their potential and explore specific, different issues of real interest.

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